

Pourquoi Chanter? An Experiential Look at the Québécois' Relationship to Singing.

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Last year a shanty group I sing with was commissioned to sing on the pier in White Rock (a Vancouver suburb) as part of some civic cultural/historical event. It was a beautiful sunny day as the six of us established ourselves at a spot on the pier where many people were strolling by. As we began to sing, people immediately in front of us smiled in embarrassment and scuttled on. As the day progressed we elicited a range of responses. Most people walked by as though we weren't there. Some smiled at us as they passed. Some were forced to stop and listen for a while by their young children who were attracted to the singing. Some looked for an instrument case into which to put money. Some appeared embarrassed, as though we were standing there naked. The ones who did stop to listen were generally older people who often stood inconspicuously off to one side, leaning on the railing. We frequently had to scan the crowd to pick out who was actually listening. For us it was a most unsatisfactory experience.

This past summer three members of our shanty group were invited to sing at the *Chants de marins* festival in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, a village on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River about two hours east of Québec City. The festival featured singers from Brittany, Normandy, Newfoundland, New York, BC (us) and various parts of Québec. We were somewhat trepidatious about performing at this francophone festival. Jon Bartlett and I have sung at many sea festivals up and down the west coast and had found them to be generally very poorly attended and often badly organized. Vancouver's recent tall ships festival, which went bankrupt, is a prime example. How then could a festival devoted exclusively to sea songs in a little village miles from the nearest city do any better?

One of our performances at *Chants de marins* was very similar in setting to that in White Rock – we were to find a spot on the quay and sing to the passers-by. As I surveyed the scene my heart sank. The concrete quay, which had no railings or benches, was empty of people and was buffeted by gusty winds and squalls of rain. We found as likely a spot as we could, girded our loins and began to sing. Within seconds people began to appear as if from nowhere. By our third song we had about forty people clustered in front of and around us, with one man holding his umbrella over me so my concertina wouldn't get wet. They sang along on all choruses, French or English. They listened intently to a slow, unaccompanied song in English. They asked questions and interjected with their own comments about sail types and fishing methods. The singing, the conversation and our physical proximity to one another had created a community of interest on that stormy quay. Eventually the rain became a downpour, and as we walked back to the village the conversation continued under umbrellas and rain slickers.

Our experience singing on the main stage in the big tent was similar. The audiences of about 450 were mostly local people and entirely francophone. We introduced our songs in French and invited people to sing along on the choruses – redundantly, as it turned out, because they were singing almost before we knew it. During our song introductions people often helped us with the missing French word

when we had difficulty explaining ourselves. It was like being in a living room with 450 people.



After the festival, we were exuberant. We felt there had been a series of ‘conversations’ between us and the people (for us the most satisfying part of singing), but how was it that we could form a temporary community with four hundred québécois on a concert stage and with forty-odd québécois on a stormy quay but could barely connect with passers-by in a much more ideal setting in our own part of the country?

I think one of the reasons that *Chants de marins* was well and enthusiastically attended is precisely because it *wasn't* in a big city. The people who came were mostly locals, scores of whom were involved in the festival and who were immensely proud of it. It was exceptionally well organized and from the moment we arrived we were received with warmth and hospitality. Because the festival took place in the village and the performers ate and slept in and around the village, there was not the separation between performers and audience that is so often the case at Anglo music festivals. In addition to our scheduled performances in the tent, on the quay or in the museum, we also sang informally at the cafés where we ate or with groups of people as we encountered them. This, in my opinion, was the most significant characteristic of *Chants de marins* – the active singing involvement of those who came. I won't call them an audience, because they were so much more than that.

How many times have I heard Anglo-Canadians bemoan their inability to sing (“I couldn't hold a tune if I had it in a bucket”)? I suspect such comments are rare among French-Canadians. What is it about the québécois that makes them feel free to sing in ways and under circumstances that Anglo-Canadians would run from? I used to think it was the existence of a shared repertoire. Most people in Québec, for example, know such traditional songs as ‘À la Claire fontaine’ or ‘C'est l'aviron’. On this trip we met several people who knew what I had thought was a much lesser-known song – ‘Partons la mer est belle’ – including the proprietor of an Ottawa River campsite who had learned it from his mother. There is in Québec a tradition of song, which dates back hundreds of years. But this did not explain people's readiness to sing in English as well as in French. There must be more factors at work than simply a shared repertoire that frees the québécois to sing so easily.

People in oral, preliterate cultures sing much more readily than those who are literate. In fact, it has often been said that the advent and establishment of literacy is the death knell of oral arts such as traditional song. In *The Ballad and the Folk*, David Buchan says that:

...the attainment of widespread literacy altered substantially the old oral culture. [I]t changed the modes of thought and...reduced the importance of the oral community's arts and entertainments... which were largely usurped by the sophisticated alternatives of literate society...[L]iteracy removed the *raison d'être* of oral composition...(p. 199)

The québécois do not live in an oral culture – they are literate. But the response to and involvement in singing of the québécois is much more akin to that of people in oral cultures than the response of Anglo-Canadians, who are estranged not only from their own repertoire of song but even from the act of singing itself. Why this dramatic difference?

In pondering this question I was put in mind of David Buchan's description of Mrs. Brown, one of Scotland's most prolific and best sources of ballads during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mrs. Brown, the literate daughter of a professor and the wife of a minister, was nonetheless the carrier and singer of countless traditional ballads, which had been sung for generations by the unlettered of Scotland. If singing ancient ballads is necessarily usurped by "the sophisticated alternatives of literate society" then Mrs. Brown would hardly be expected to know any ballads. Buchan accounts for this apparent contradiction by explaining that Mrs. Brown:

learned her ballad-stories...at an early age, retained [them] in her mind by a purely auditory process...and kept them mentally distinct...from written material. It is as if she possessed a bicameral mind, the one part literate and the other oral. (pp. 67/68)

The reason for Mrs. Brown's bicameral mind, says Buchan, is that she in fact spoke two languages, English and Scots. The dialect of Scots (or 'the Doric') in the region of northeastern Scotland where Mrs. Brown lived is an Anglo-Saxon language "enriched by graftings from the Scandinavian, French, Dutch and Gaelic languages." (p. 9). When there is a significant difference between a dialect and the 'official' language, people who speak both are, in a sense, bilingual. Each language carries with it its own particular modes of thought and expression. Hence, to be bilingual is to have two ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

Literate Scots became accustomed to carrying two languages in their heads; English for writing, Scots for speaking, English for 'proper' occasions, Scots for 'real' life. The upshot was a peculiarly Scottish dissociation of sensibility whereby Scotsmen *felt* in Scots and *thought* in English. This psychic cleavage helps explain why Scotland retained such a rich stock of folk literature up to the present [20th] century. (p. 68)

I propose that the québécois, too, have bicameral minds. 'Joual' is the name for the various dialects of French spoken in Québec, and is descended from the

French spoken by the early immigrants to New France. People from France have difficulty understanding Joual – for anglophones who have been taught Parisian French the dialect is almost impossible. Imagine someone with high school French trying to make sense of 'On s'dit 'y f'ra p'ête beau d'main' (from the song 'Rivière Jaune' on Rêve du Diable's album of the same name). The québécois are taught to speak and write 'proper' French in school but they speak Joual among themselves. Like the Scots who speak Doric, the québécois *feel* in Joual and *think* in French. Mrs. Brown sang ballads in Scots because "Scots was for her the language of *real* speech and *real* feeling, and... afforded her the deep emotional satisfaction that writing in English could not give." (p. 69). In the same way that speaking Joual is for *real* life, singing the old familiar traditional songs affords the québécois 'deep emotional satisfaction'.

The perceived denial of access to this 'deep emotional satisfaction' expresses itself in a strong identification with a particular linguistic/cultural identity. This sense of uniqueness – which often contains the seeds of nationalism – is common to both Québec and Scotland. The parallels extend further. In the world of literature, for example, the orthography of Scots dialogue presents similar difficulties to that encountered by québécois writers such as Roch Carrier or Michel Tremblay in writing Joual.

This by itself does not, however, fully explain the enthusiastic singing at Chants de marins. First of all, not all québécois speak Joual, and many québécois songs are not in Joual. But the people who sang with us at the festival sang not only in Joual or French but also in English. It seems that the 'bicameral mind' theory is not therefore sufficient explanation for the québécois' relationship to singing.

Both the Scots and the québécois have endured centuries of friction with the English. English emerged in Scotland as the administrative and public language, and Scots as the language people spoke among themselves. In New France the administrative language was French while the 'habitants' spoke Joual. Following the conquest of Québec in 1759 there emerged a kind of alliance between the educated French, the clergy and the habitants. Suddenly the old oppressors and oppressed became allies against the anglophone conquerors. The world was divided into 'nous autres' and 'les autres'. This did not, however, prevent the old French administration and clergy from continuing to rule the habitants. There were, in fact, two layers of administration in Québec. The English looked after government and business, and the educated francophones, especially the church, looked after

people's spiritual, educational and health needs. On the face of it one might say that the québécois had developed 'tricameral' minds incorporating English, French and Joual. This was not, in fact, the case, because, until well into the twentieth century, most québécois spoke no English. The centuries of linguistic and cultural isolation of New France had created a society with its own culture and sensibilities. In all respects but political, the québécois were a nation. As the rest of North America became overrun and settled by anglophones, this sense of uniqueness was strengthened. Lower Canada became an island of francophones in a sea of anglophones.

During the second half of the twentieth century there emerged a significant diminution in the power of the Church and 'French' education. With the Quiet Revolution came the emergence of publicly recognized québécois culture. The sea of anglophones surrounding them had a powerful effect on québécois sensibilities. What began as a French-Joual bicameral mindset evolved into a québécois versus English mindset, and the unconscious cultural expressions of the former dichotomy became conscious acts of self-affirmation. Song was an indispensable ingredient in this flowering of québécois nationalism, best exemplified by the opening of hockey games in Québec with thousands of people singing "Gens du pays". A group called 'Action-chanson' became active in the seventies and put out a publication entitled *Pourquoi Chanter?* (from which the title of this article is taken), which explored the use of song in the struggle for self-determination. Gilles Vigneault and Pauline Julien, whose songs were modeled on a synthesis of québécois traditional song and French-style chansonniers, became national heroes.

The ongoing Joul oral musical culture under the French regime and well into the post-conquest years, coupled with the years of nationalist struggles and cultural-linguistic self-affirmation which followed, have made singing a central ingredient to québécois' sense of who they are. The people at the *Chants de marins* festival were expressing their cultural self-confidence by singing with us in both official languages, although they saved their most enthusiastic singing for the familiar québécois songs sung by performers from their own 'nation'. Because they were not alienated from their national culture and thereby from singing, they were able to participate warmly in our songs and at the same time remain true to their own identity. In fact, singing with us strengthened their cultural identity because they were able to share with a group of 'les autres' an activity (i.e. singing) intrinsic to their own culture.

It was somewhat of a letdown to come home from Québec to our musically alienated Anglo-Canadian milieu. In English Canada the notion of a shared linguistic or musical culture is much more problematic. Sadly, we cannot expect to find the enthusiasm for singing here that we experienced in Québec. With the possible exception of Newfoundland, English Canada does not contain the preconditions for a healthily singing population – but that's a topic for another article.

References:

- Buchan, David. *The Ballad and the Folk*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.
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